The Palgrave Handbook of Islam in Africa

Edited by

Fallou Ngom · Mustapha H. Kurfi · Toyin Falola

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Contents

CHAPTER 17

Islamic Calligraphy, Abstraction and Magic Talismans in Northern Nigeria

Abdalla Uba Adamu

Introduction

Islamic calligraphy is an entrenched literary and artistic expression in the Arab world. Consequently, it carries with it some ethnographic baseline assumptions of the significance and place of art and artistry in the Arab world. The migration of Islam to African countries did not carry with it the cultural baggage—at least in terms of arts and aesthetics—of the Arab world, and indeed many African Muslim communities retain the fundamental core values and faith of Islam, as well as African traditional practices that often do not clash or contradict Islamic practices, filtering out any influence that is entrenched in Arab mindsets. Thus, African Muslims distinguish between what is clearly Islamic from what is clearly Arabic, and often do not mix the two. It is for this reason that Arab cultural icons and artifacts do not find much place in African Muslim cultural landscape.

The rise and spread of Islamic fundamentalism, rooted in Saudi Arabia's perception of Islam (see, for instance, Thurston 2016), further entrenched essentially Arabic, rather than Islamic cultural practices in the new wave of Islamism that swept most parts of the world, including African Muslim communities. For instance, mode of dressing, particularly for the female, became a new form of figurative representation. Already against art and artistry, the new fundamentalism found a neat niche in African societies already not used to seeing art as an expressive aesthetic form, but as utilitarian, functionalist craft forms. Islamic calligraphy in Africa therefore has to contend with both Islamic perceptions of art and emic perceptions of what constitutes art.

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The main gateway to Islamic calligraphy is the Arabic language and its component alphabets which hold a spiritual value to Muslims principally because of the connections between the language and Qurʾān. As Burckhardt (2009, 44) noted, "the extraordinary normative power of the Arabic language derives from its role as a sacred language." Islamic calligraphy, therefore centers on the art of the Qurʾānic Word creating a visual tapestry of artistic expression appreciated across all cultures. This art of the Word became interwoven with the emic artistic inclinations of the various Muslim communities, and despite transnational influences, create a vividly recognizable independent and unique Islamic art forms.

This chapter analyzes the forms of Islamic calligraphy among the Hausa Muslim communities of northern Nigeria, with particular reference to the Islamic city of Kano. Andrea Brigaglia (2009, 2011, 2013, 2017) and Kurfi (2017) have extensively explored the scriptural aesthetics of the book trade in Kano and the evolution of the script as calligraphy. This chapter extends the narrative to include three forms of Islamic calligraphy in Kano (or at best, artistic reworking or re-contextualization of the Qurʾānic word in a visually aesthetic form): the aesthetics of the Word of God as internally evolved script, peripheral aesthetics, and the spiritual aesthetics of the Word. Data for the study was collected over a period of three-month immersive fieldwork in Kano in late 2017 interacting with calligraphers, abstract artists, and merchants of textual amulets called *khātim* (Hausa: *hatimi*) in the ancient sectors of Kano city.

The Art of the Word

Calligraphy, as an artistic expression in the Islamic world, provides creative opportunities for not only expression of an art form, but also for elevating that form to an accepted level and tradition. The adoption of the calligraphic art form solves the problems of the controversy of image-making in Islam, while allowing Muslims significant leeway to express artistic skills.

Lack of structured art schools and lessons, coupled with the local perception of figurative art as *kufr* (non-belief)—what Natif (2011) refers to as "idol anxiety"—channeled any creative calligraphic energy among Muslim Hausa away from aniconism and toward the art of the word, rather than its stylized aesthetics. As Osborn (2008, 126) further noted, "Arabic calligraphy operates as a locus of multiple semiotic codes, and movement among these codes allows viewers to interpret the visual marks of writing through diverse channels."

The art of the Fatimids (909–1171) in North Africa focused mainly on calligraphy and decorative vines, and also frequently depicted animals and humans. The celebrated luster-painted Fatimid ceramics from Egypt are especially distinguished by the representation of the human figure. Some of these ceramics have been decorated with simplified copies of illustrations of the princely themes, but others have depictions of scenes of Egyptian daily life.

It is this tradition that eventually found its way from about 1930 to Muslim northern Nigeria in form of posters depicting various prophets (essentially Adam, Abraham) and religious icons (e.g., *Al-Burāq*—a mystical half-woman, half-horse that carried the Prophet Muḥammad on a spiritual night journey for a direct audience with God).

Due to this ambivalence of the role of art in the African Muslim world, Hausa art tended to be totally divorced from any religious iconography. For as Al-Faruqi (2014, 19) noted, "from Rabat to Mindanao, from Kano to Samarqand, the Qurʾānic passages executed in Arabic script have provided the most revered ingredient of the arts."

One Script to Bind Them All—The R/Evolution of a Script

Traditional Islamic calligraphy has always referred to the stylized calligraphy of the Islamic word using different styles. This traditional calligraphy has established its identity through its evolutionary aesthetics and assumed a distinct character and identity that locates it within some particular cultural dynamics. Subsequently, even if not from the Arab world, basing itself on Arabic word entrenches its distinct characteristic. The modification of the word as stylized aesthetic art form took a long time to evolve, even in the Arab world. The fundamental base Nabatean Aramaic script, recognized as the first Arabic script started as a blocky uneven glyph. Its earliest form was discovered in the fourth century (Bauer 1996). As Mumin (2014, 41) pointed out:

> This script has been used in other parts of the world, notably Africa and Asia, for the writing of indigenous languages. These orthographic traditions have become known by a number of names, such as *Kiarabu* among the Swahili, *Wolofal* among the Wolof, or *Wadaad's Writing* among the Somali. The term with the widest local use is certainly *ʿAjamī* (and a number of varieties of the same term, such as *Äjäm* in Ethiopia, *Ajamiyya* among the Peul, *Anjemi* among the Yoruba), which originally denotes something like "foreigners' speech or writing."

ʿAjamī, as a referent for non-Arab writing, provided a powerful entry point of traditional Islamic calligraphy into non-Arabic languages and peoples. Yet the ʿAjamī script is not about stylized aesthetics, but about the power of the Arabic script in a non-religious context—in effect, ʿAjamī provides non-Arabs a form of literacy in their language, without necessarily being fluent in the Arabic language. Arabic speakers would certainly not understand any ʿAjamī script by merely reading it—precisely the reason they (and not the users) pejoratively refer to it with its adopted name. As Mumin (2014), building up on Bosworth (1985), noted the term was Arabocentric and used "by Arabs conscious of their political and social superiority in early Islam" (41), and

seems to originally refer to mumbling. Yet this derision seemed to be targeted mainly at African Muslim literary culture as confirmed by Mumin (2014). It is often a mooted point that Farsi and Urdu are both ʿAjamī scripts used to express Persian and Urdu languages respectively. However, sharing historical and literary roots with Arabic excluded the Urdu and Farsi ʿAjamī scripts from derision. Similarly, the Muslim Morisco population of Spain relied on Aljamiado, Spanish written using the Arabic script (Cook 2016, 16) to resist Christian literature among their population, despite persecution.

However, regardless of encoded contempt in the term "ʿAjamī," it provided African Muslims their own Nabatean template to create unique Afrocentric Arabic script embellished not with Arab aesthetics, but display of skilled African craftsmanship. The result is a traditionally Arabic calligraphic script that speaks to Africans in their own ethnographic milieu. Years later, when Arabic typefaces became available as TrueType fonts, ʿAjamī scholars in northern Nigeria rejected them on the basis of lack of authenticity to reproduction of their thoughts. This was aided, of course, by the absence of certain ʿAjamī letters in the Arabic script and which the various font foundries did not seem to capture because of an unexplored market.

ʿAjamī, however, is more than a script; it is also an expression, it is an artistic interpretation of the Word. The tasks of reproducing the Holy Qurʾān for the Muslim faithful through Arabic demanded a degree of penmanship, and it is in the process of the development of this penmanship that a distinct African Arabic script emerged, both as Arabic and ʿAjamī in the beginnings of Islamic literacy in Africa in the eleventh century. Devoid of the tradition of aesthetic literary expression familiar to the Arabs, African Muslim penmanship in the reproduction of the Qurʾān on wooden slates and expensive imported paper from North Africa, carried with it the natural flair of the copyist and craftsman and consequently created a definitive style that is unique to each community of scholars and copyists.

The African Arabic calligraphic script, therefore, did not start out as "Islamic" calligraphy, for it was not targeted as an aesthetic display of penmanship, but as clear and accurate rendering of a source—and yet varying the copying so that the copy assumes a distinct character from the original. As Dobronravin (2014, 159) pointed out:

> Before the writing and orthography reforms of the twentieth century, traditional (*maghribī/sūdānī*) Arabic script was the only form of writing known to the majority of West African Muslims. Several elements of the script differed from what was common in the Middle East.

In the early ʿAjamī literary expressions, the Qurʾān, in a written form, was not widely available, and many copyists reproduced the entire Qurʾān accurately from memory based on the traditional Qurʾānic school system they attended. Consequently, African Muslim communities, with a totally different aesthetic cartography from that of the Arab world consequently created a distinct form

of literary presentation that locates the artistry of African Islamic calligraphy within an identified, unique, cultural milieu.

The transnational flow of Islam to northern Nigeria from West African sources, themselves influenced by North African sources, ensured the default adoption of the Maghribī script calligraphic style in all written discourses, but mainly in the reproduction of the imported Qurʾān; for as Blair (2006, 573) noted, "calligraphy, especially in Koran manuscripts is…conservative, and artists felt freer to introduce local features for illumination." Further, as Brigaglia (2011, 54) pointed out, "as they were meant for an audience which was not accustomed to the Eastern Arabic scripts available in the printed industry" the calligraphy of these books "had to conform as much as possible to a *local* calligraphic standard." Thus changing cultural contexts in the reproduction of the Qurʾān in Nigeria transformed the Maghribī calligraphic script into what Octave Houdas in 1886 dubbed "Sūdānī" (Blair 2008, 60) in his description of the West African Arabic script bringing out its "coarse outlook" which made it "easy to recognize" Brigaglia (2013, 198). If anything, this "coarseness" emphasized the departing points of artistic creativity between the "refined" scripts of Eastern Arabic calligraphers, and rooted the "Sūdānī" as an African domestication of the Arabic script devoid of flourishes, thus emphasizing its functionalist focus.

Later writers were to simply refer to it as "Ajami" (Bivar 1968) and shunned the use of "Sūdānī." It is not clear why Bivar chose to call it "Ajami," particularly as the Qurʾān, copied locally was always in Arabic, rather than in a non-Arabic language. This is more so as the term "Ajami" would only be relevant when applied to non-religious narrative in the local language. However, in the further evolution of the "Sūdānī" label, Brigaglia (2009, 2011, 2013) disagreed with the term, and prefers to call these West African Arabic scripts variously "Hausawī" (2009) or "Kanawī" (2011) which he argues is an extension of what he called the Hausawī script and referring to Hausa speaking areas; and "Barnawī" (2013, 2017), referring to Kanuri speaking areas. Again, as with Bivar, Brigaglia did not justify these names, serving as they did, convenient labels, rather than descriptors. These terms are certainly not used locally by the local clerics and scribes (Hausa: *alarammomi*).

The variation between West African and Middle Eastern Arabic scripts further emphasizes the aesthetic departing point between the two forms of writing, even if writing the same thing. This underscores what Ngom (2018, 145) referred to as "Quran-derived dual literacies." This saw the emergence of two scripts that have sources in the mode of *reciting* the Qurʾān: *Warsh*, common in North and West Africa, and *Ḥafs*, common in other parts of the Muslim world. Consequently, "the overwhelming majority of West African Arabic and Ajami texts are written based on the Warsh orthography. The use of Ḥafs orthography in West African Ajami texts is limited" (ibid). And while different African Muslim communities have developed their own distinct

Islamic calligraphy, the calligraphic art form in northern Nigeria is based on the mainstream copying of the Qurʾān and other religious texts using the localized Warsh version.

Thus the evolution of the script used by Muslim scribes in northern Nigeria shows a fascinating transition from orality to a script as reflected in the vocal origin of the Warsh script; for while it remains a vocal mechanism, it gradually transformed into a written expression. This is tied down to the vocal origin of the first Qurʾānic literacy in northern Nigeria which placed emphasis on the recitation of the Qurʾān. Years on, the necessity of writing down the Qur'ān from memory led to the default adoption of Warsh transcription based on local accentuations. The wide scale adoption of the script is what becomes variously referred to as "Kanawī," "Hausawī" or "Barnawī." The locals simply refer to it as Warsh.

The power of the Warsh script among the Hausa received a boost in the summer of 2018 when a software developer from Gombe, northern Nigeria, Sagir Yūsuf Muḥammad, encoded the Sharif Bala script of the Qurʾān from Kano as a Smartphone Android application, *Al-Qurʾān Warsh na Sherif Bala* (Sherif Bala Warsh Qurʾān) as shown in Fig. 17.1a and b.

The screenshots are the Warsh Qurʾān copied by Sharu Bala (also known as Sharif Bala or Sherif Bala). As one blurb states, "this app is the first handwritten Qurʾān mobile app with distinct features that make it easy to use." This is a radical insertion and entrenchment of the Warsh script into West African Islamic literary publics, particularly among the millions of Qurʾānic school teachers, students, and pupils who have access to it via commonly available cheap Android phones. It is based on the rendering of the Qurʾān as detailed in Brigaglia (2009).

Abstractions on the Edge of Aesthetics

As noted earlier, the Hausa respect for the Word prevented their scribes and calligraphers from creating aesthetic variations to their creation of the Warsh script, except for the various colored inks to embellish and bring out the vowels, diacritics, and bookmarks. Such calligraphic transformation of the Word of God is considered "wasa da ayar Allah" (playing with the word of God) by the local scribes I talked to; thus the emphasis on the colors. As Biddle (2011, 8) discovered, an "examination of over twelve thousand northern Nigerian folios revealed a very wide range of ink colors, from glossy dense black to very pale light brown, orange red to pale pink, some opaque whilst others faint and transparent, some stained the paper whilst others had rough particulates." By 2018, those twig and cornstalk pens and sooty inks had been joined by commercially available multicolored Crayola markers—cheaper, less bothersome, and providing the same effect. However, the decision on which inks to use—whether traditional or Crayola—was determined by the medium.

Fig. 17.1 **a** and **b**: Hausa Warsh script in Android applications (Screenshot by Abdalla Uba Adamu)

Copying the Qurʾān on paper merits the use of the traditional *tawwada* (ink). However, the vowels, bookmarks, and so on are embellished by Crayola markers, avoiding the cumbersome process of preparing the colored inks—not to mention the mess created by low-quality paper absorbing blobs of ink, making the

Fig. 17.1 (continued)

outcome indecipherable. The preferred high-quality paper, Conqueror (locally referred to as *holama*) brand has increasingly become expensive, and the scribes resort to A4 printing papers, commonly available due to the boom in the establishment of computer business centers in urban northern Nigeria.

The medium that makes the most use of the Crayola is the wooden slate tablet (Hausa: *allo*) "certificate" with an illustrated design (Hausa: *zayyana*).

Fig. 17.2 **a** and **b**: Zayyana details, Wooden Medium and Paper (Credit: Abdalla Uba Adamu)

The zayyana is a brightly colored geometric design that surrounds a portion of the Chapter of the Qurʾān that is presented to the Qurʾānic student on graduation (Hausa: *sauka*) as a certificate. The zayyana is also often used on the paper Warsh Qurʾān at the end of a *Sūra* (chapter). Examples are shown in Fig. 17.2a and b.

Fig. 17.2 (continued)

It is in the art of the zayyana that Hausa calligraphers put out all the stops to display their skills and in the process, uphold their awe for the Word of God by surrounding it with geometric beauty. It is not clear when the leap was made between geometry and Islam in northern Nigeria; but transferring the predominant artistic motifs, especially those of the Emiral variety (i.e., emanating or inspired by the geometric art of the Kano Emirate) to zayyana production would have been a matter of time. In the Middle East,

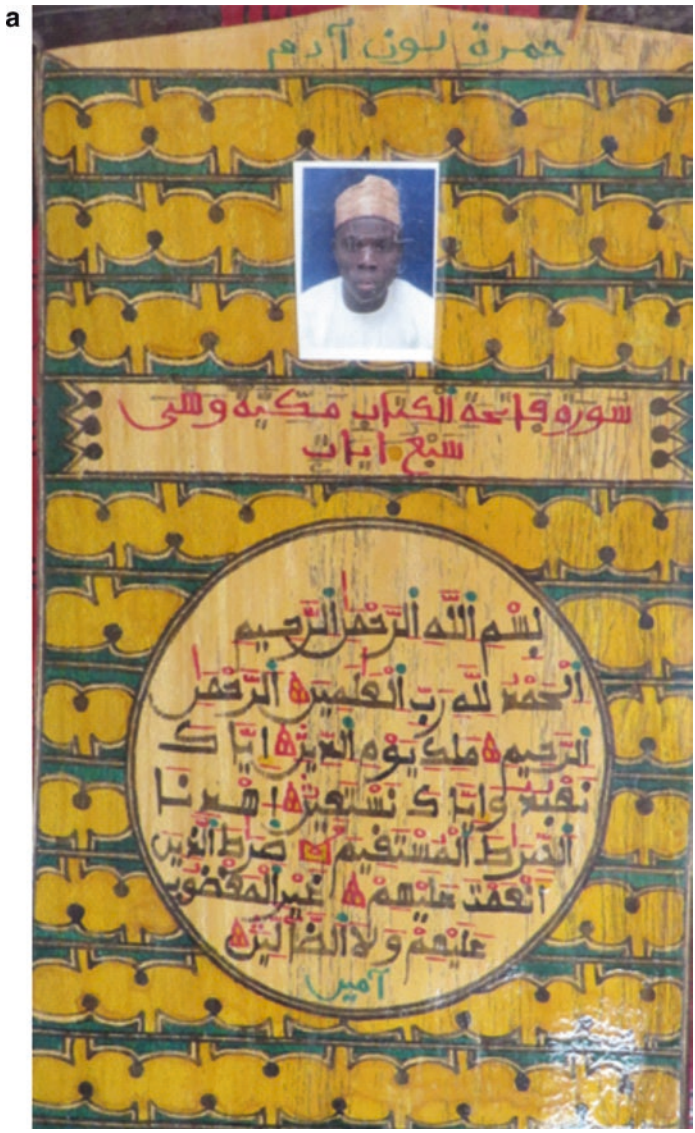

Fig. 17.3 **a** and **b**: Zayyana Varieties (Credit: Abdalla Uba Adamu)

geometrical designs in architecture and decoration provided "a badge for the sovereignty of Muslim princes that functioned as an informative visual code, a princely label" (Gonzalez 2001, 70). Such princely aesthetics seemed to have evolved also in northern Nigeria and provided a template for decoration of buildings. Hausa calligraphers merely extend such template to mosques with Islamic art to enhance the appeal of the mosques, while retaining the sobriety of the original Word.

Fig. 17.3 (continued)

The common structure of the zayyana certificate is the quotation of the first few verses of *Sūrat al-Baqara*, with the vowels variously colored. As can be seen in Fig. 17.2a and b, the text retains the classic Hausa Warsh script, but is enclosed in a triangular frame; itself a departure, as most zayyana designers use a circle frame. Surrounding the triangular frame is the main multicolored design—the direction and dimension of which depends on the

Fig. 17.4 Mai Zayyana art shop, Sharifai, Kano city, January 2018 (Credit: Abdalla Uba Adamu)

calligrapher. The most predominant motif, however, is variations of geometric forms. Since the use of foliage motifs has not been entrenched in the aesthetic practices of the calligraphers (leaving such motifs to Hausa women artists who weave them on clothing such as bedspreads or pillow cases), it is rare to find any zayyana with other than geometric motifs, and an example is shown in Fig. 17.3a and b.

The left zayyana in Fig. 17.3b is unique in the use of *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* as the certificate, rather than the *Sūrat al-Baqara* more commonly used. Its design is also different in focusing on a slant toward foliage motif. It also introduced a practice intended to mimic the certificates issued to high school students after completing and taking examinations. Since such certificates bear the names and the pictures of the graduates, zayyana innovators include both the name and the passport picture of the student as integral designs of the zayyana. The left zayyana in Fig. 17.3a belongs to Hamratu Lawan Adamu. Thus printing technologies of instant passport production create a more visual ownership of the zayyana certificate. The zayyana on the right introduces a separate artistic space for the design by using first a multicolored border to enclose the whole design, and then a portion of the *allo* to draw the zayyana. These are just two of the thousands of variations of zayyana available throughout northern Nigeria.

Fig. 17.5 Young Hausa Calligrapher student of Mubarak Munir Muḥammad—and Crayola (Credit: Abdalla Uba Adamu)

While contemporary zayyana designers have no specific names for their designs, older traditional calligraphers used names like *mai kurada*, *idon zaki*, *idon zawara*, *ganyan tsamiya*, *mai akwato*, etc. With a blurred line separating commerce and art, zayyana designs can best be described as commercial art, as seen in Fig. 17.4 which is one of the shops that produce the zayyana in Sharifai ward in the old city in Kano.

Mai Zayyana's shop is run by Mubarak Munir Muḥammad who was the main calligrapher, assisted by six young boys. Mubarak draws the designs, and the young assistants—all family members—fill in the spaces with multicolored inks. Mubarak's father, whom I also talked to, was more traditional in the use of colors, since he relies mainly on inks he prepared himself; whereas the younger calligraphers rely more on Crayola markers. Figure 17.5 shows one of Mubarak's young assistants designing the zayyana.

The choice and combination of colors is left to the young colorist, with Mubarak guiding them and ensuring contrasting colors along a particular axis. Mai Zayyana shop focuses only on the designs, leaving the leather work that binds the allo to leather craftsmen in other parts of the city.

The zayyana could be commissioned to commemorate the end of *sauka*, or completion of the study of the Qurʾān. However, many zayyana artists also produce them *en masse* and take them to the market for sale. Thus Qurʾānic schools can purchase them in bulk for their graduating students to buy on the day of the graduation.

Throwing a Curve in Kano Zayyana Design

While the design and production of the zayyana remains a traditional niche market in northern Nigeria, increasing contact with other art forms has led to a revolutionization of the process of the designs. In 2006, the British Council, Kano in association with the Prince of Wales School of Traditional Arts, London, organized a series of workshops for local craftsmen and women titled "Celebrating the Traditional Arts of Northern Nigeria" for which I was the coordinator. Three workshops were held from November 21, 2006 to December 19, 2007. Practitioners from Kano and surrounding states in diverse areas of crafts were selected and trained in architectural decoration, embroidery, decorative gourds, pottery, leatherwork, calligraphy, whitesmith, and textiles. The calligrapher chosen was Mustapha Bala Gabari (see Kurfi 2017), erroneously recorded by other researchers (Kurfi 2017) as the son of Sharu Bala Gabari, but who was actually a ward, student, mentee, and protégé of the famous Warsh calligrapher. The workshop drew on the geometric experience of Gabari as a zayyana designer and emphasized its refinement using modern technical tools. Gabari subsequently established an Institute of Calligraphy and Geometric Design in Kano in 2016 to train young people in geometric design—thus taking the art of the zayyana to the next level.

The new approach by Gabari to zayyana design reduces the complexity of the traditional zayyana to simpler curves, circles, and angles. The repetition of the designs within a large space—mainly art paper, rather than canvas—creates a visually striking design that not only pays homage to the original zayyana, but also looks to the future. Figure 17.6a and b show Gabari zayyana, and his new approach to the designs.

Fig. 17.6 **a** and **b**: Gabari original Zayyana (left) and New Directions (right) (Credit: Abdalla Uba Adamu)

Gabari's zayyana on the left is unique in the sense of having his "signature" on the upper left side of the slate—a common practice among contemporary artists who sign their canvases. Further, instead of filling the entire surface of the slate with designs, he deliberately left a lot of white space so that the eyes can focus on the centrality of the designs in the middle of the slate.

Gabari's designs are produced using contemporary artistic drawing equipment, especially those from the German company Staedler. These include

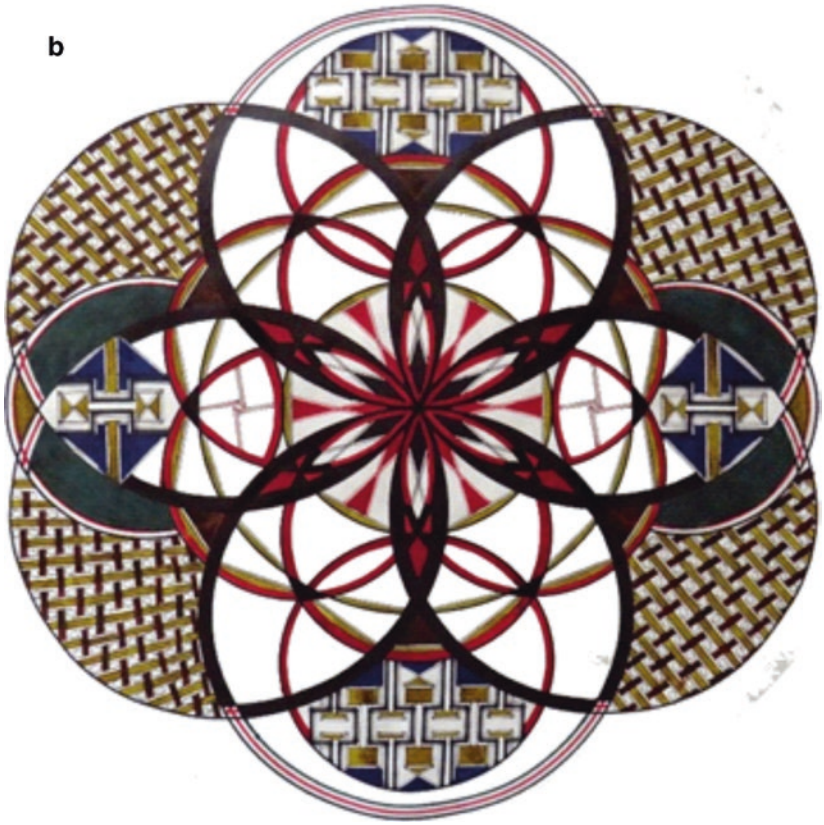

Fig. 17.6 (continued)

Mars Comfort 551 compass and Marsmatic 745 drawing ink, set squares, rulers, and circle templates. These modern graphic tools are more precise than the freehand style adopted by traditional zayyana designers and therefore create more precise edges. While it was only Gabari who has adopted this strategy, mainstream zayyana designers have retained the traditional inks and cornstalk pens that have been their tradecraft for years. This signifies a departure for Gabari as a designer; for while traditional zayyana designers retain the wooden *allo* medium, Gabari uses art paper with smooth surface finish. His designs are divided into two: the predominant group consists of drawings with repetitive variation of circles, curves, and triangles. A sample of this group is shown in Fig. 17.7a through d.

These designs are used both on *alluna* (pl. *allo*), but Gabari had increasingly tilted toward using them as independent zayyana decorative elements and by 2018 had commercialized them as artworks, sold to hotel chains and government offices. Very few of the clients situate these visually striking

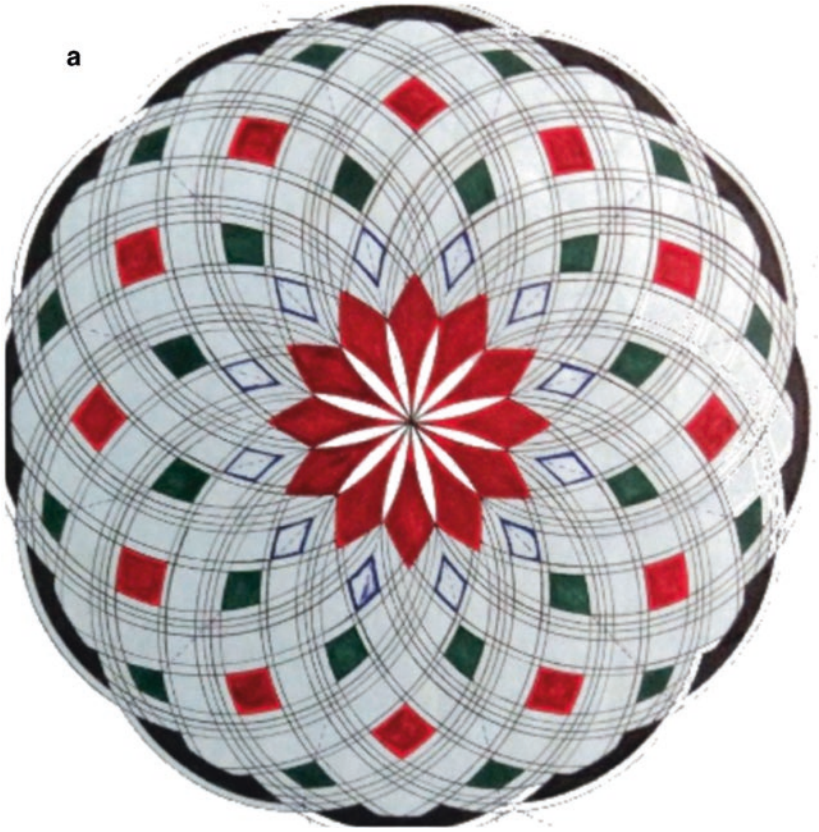

Fig. 17.7 **a** through **d**: Gabari Zayyana Patterns (Credit: Abdalla Uba Adamu)

designs as zayyana art. The second category of zayyana designs by Gabari decorates quotations from the Qurʾān with his new designs, using the traditional Warsh calligraphy, as seen in Fig. 17.8a and b.

The left design in Fig. 17.8a has the Qurʾān verse, *Qul al-Lāhumma Mālik al-Mulki Tūʾti al-Mulka Man Tashāʾ* (English: O Allah! the Sovereign-Lord of all dominion: You grant dominion to whom You will and take dominion away from whom You will). Taken from *Sūrat āl ʿImrān* (Q3:27), and drawn on paper, it is framed by precise lines and circles of the Gabari studio, even if retaining the original Warsh script. The design is also meant as a commercial counterpoint to the imported calligraphic designs from the Middle East containing various verses of the Qurʾān.

The design on the right in Fig. 17.8b is a complete rendition of *Sūrat al-Ikhlās* (fidelity/sincerity), 112th *sūra* of the Qurʾān, with individual words of the *sūra* in a frame. On top of the *Bismillāh* are two pointed lines colored red and green, representing twin spears (Hausa: *tagwayen masu*)—the

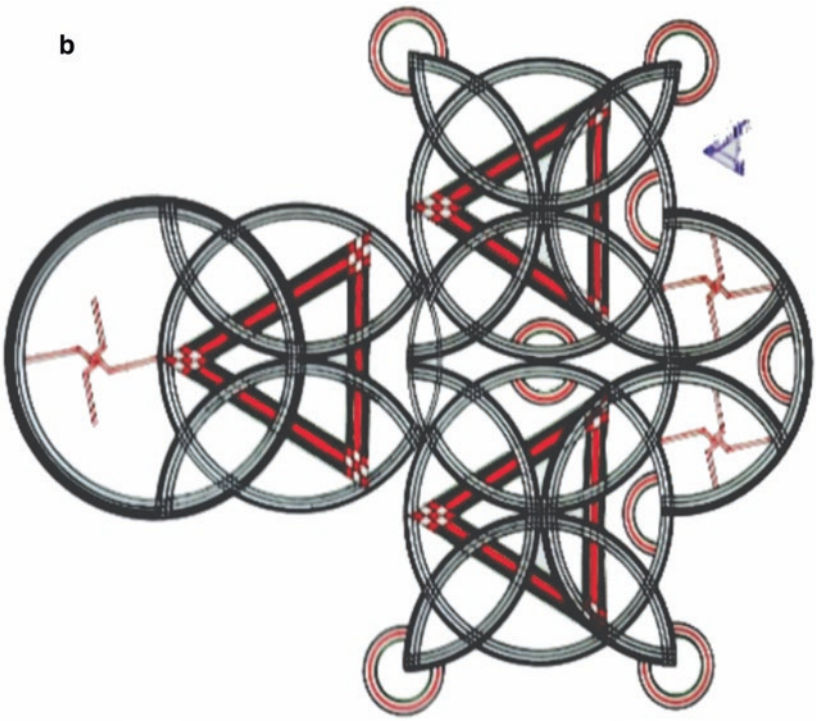

Fig. 17.7 (continued)

symbols of the Kano Emir's Palace, pointing, left and right to the King's Prayer in Hausa ʿAjamī: *Allah Yataimaki Sarki*, Allah Yaƙara lafiya (English: May Allah Guide the King; May Allah strengthen his health). The design was meant as a gift to the Emir of Kano. The innovative approaches by Gabari to new Islamic calligraphy has earned him commissions to do the same calligraphy in various mosques in Kano in 2017, as Fig. 17.9 shows him in action at a local mosque in Kano.

Calligraphy inside mosques has attracted various debates among clerics in Kano with opposing views and interpretations. Subsequently, the mosques tended to be largely unadorned so as not to distract worshippers, according to the Mālikī School of Islamic jurisprudence. This does not deter some mosques from commissioning stunning graphics and calligraphy. A vivid example is shown in Fig. 17.10.

Figure 17.10 is a detail from the inner dome of the Mosque of Sarkin Sharifai (the Leader of Sharifai Ward) in Kano and shows a combination of the Kano emirate motifs and stylized Warsh calligraphy. Other mosques in Kano with calligraphic wall murals included Friday mosques at Tudun Wada, Dorayi, and Ungogo (Muḥammad 2015). The numerous calligraphic murals

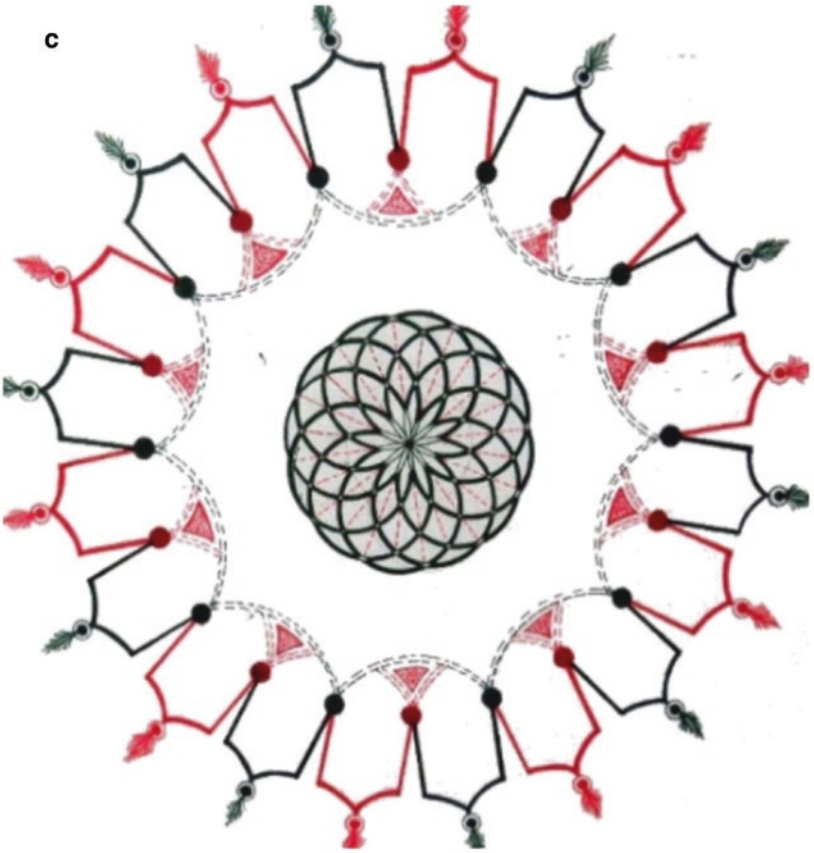

Fig. 17.7 (continued)

and decals in Muḥammad's study contain many studied attempts at mimicking the aesthetics of the standard Arabic calligraphy, using a combination of different script styles, but which all came out as Warsh.

The calligraphy of the Word is also often used on walls and shops to seek spiritual protection for such establishments. This is displayed as clearly recognizable and in a utilitarian Warsh script to emphasize its talismanic function. Figure 17.11a and b show examples from Kano.

The left picture in Fig. 17.11a reads as follows: *harāmun ʿalayhi al-nāru qalbun aḥabbuhu* (English: hell fire is denied to the heart that loves Prophet Muḥammad). It is the end of a stanza in the poem *Qaṣīda al-Ishriniyyat fi Madḥ Sayyidinā Muḥammad*, referred to as the *Ishriniyyat* locally. It was composed by Abū Zayd ʿAbd al-Raḥman b. Yakhlaftan b. Aḥmad al-Fazāzī (d. 1230) and extremely popular in northern Nigeria since the advent

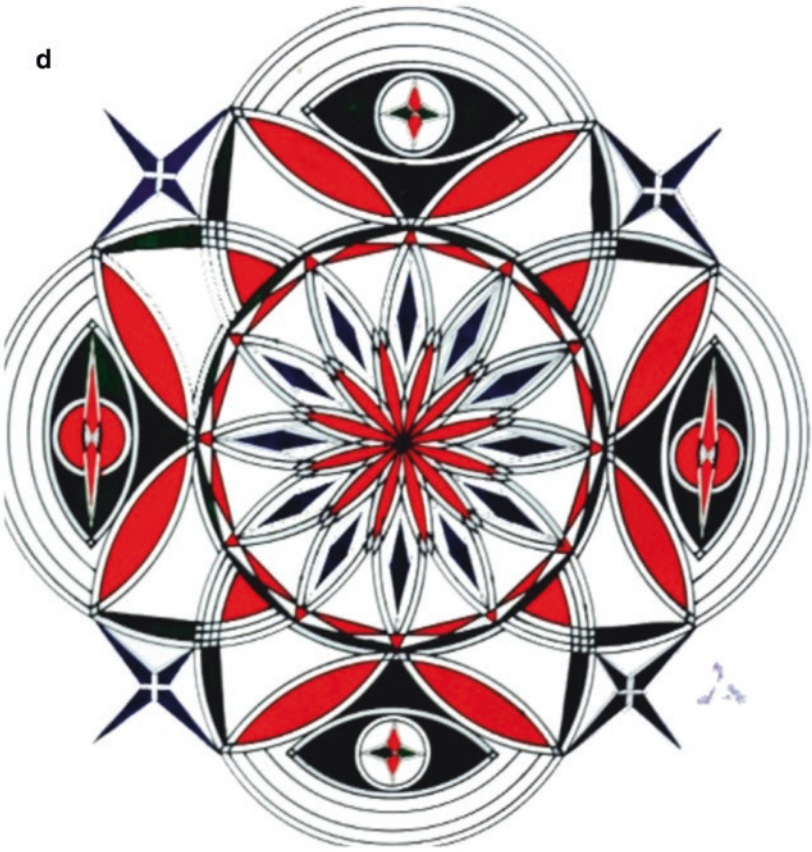

Fig. 17.7 (continued)

of Islam in the region. The shop front on the right has *Ḥasbuna Allāhu Wa-l-Niʿma-l-Wakīl* (Allah (Alone) is Sufficient for us, and He is the Best Disposer of affairs (for us) from *Sūrat āl ʿImrān* (Q.173) as its talismanic mural. It is a powerful prayer for protection for the faithful.

It is worth noting that these two samples display scripts that are decidedly non-Warsh—gravitating toward Ḥafs. This might be the outcome of a sharp division among scripters in Kano. The traditional Qurʾānic teachers and students of the Tsangaya schooling system (Hausa: *alarammomi*) tended to be entrenched in Warsh, while scribes who attended the modernized Islamiyya schools with focus on additional subjects such as Arabic grammar in their curriculum tended to favor Ḥafs scripts.

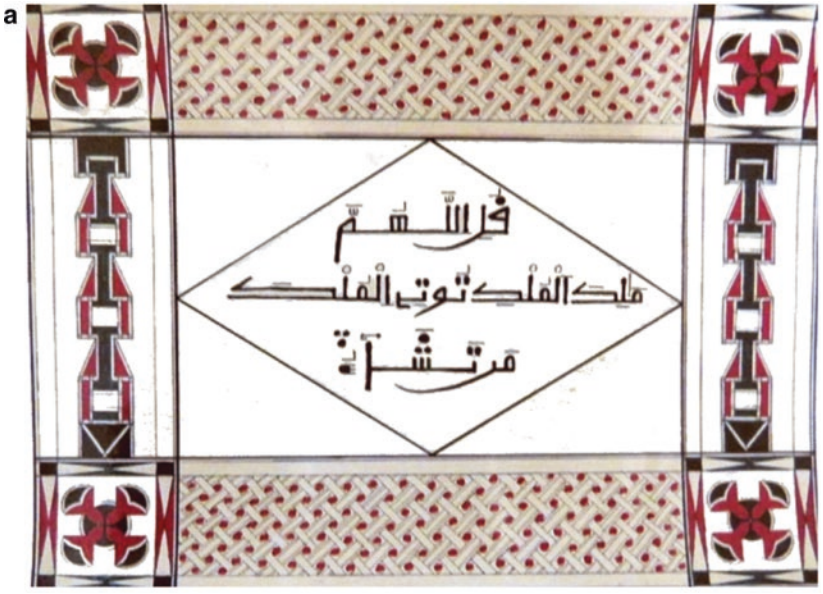

Fig. 17.8 **a** and **b**: New Directions in Hausa Islamic Calligraphy (Credit: Abdalla Uba Adamu)

Shamanic Calligraphy and Mystification of the Word

The Hausa reverence for the Qurʾānic word was taken a notch higher and converted into an art form when various verses of the Qurʾān were taken—often totally out of context—re-imagined and given mystic powers by Hausa shamans as protective textual amulets. This mystification of the religious word, both from Islamic and Christian perspectives has a long history. In the Christian world, textual amulets in the Middle Ages, especially in Western Europe from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries were common modes of creative and spiritual expression Skemer (2006). Intended to ward off evil, the texts had a powerful influence on the believers and their efficacy. The texts were in the form of folded sheets and small text rolls that could easily be transported, bound to the body, or worn around the neck. As Skemer (2006, 125) further notes, "at the very least, common writing formats of textual amulets facilitated effective placement of powerful words."

This tradition while remaining only in medieval Europe, has been sustained in the Muslim world, due to the power of the Qurʾān as curatively divine source. As Canaan (2004, 125) notes, in the Arab world:

> Talismans are at present inscribed on paper, leather, glass, bone, porcelain and earthenware dishes and pitchers, also on wood and stone and on all kinds of

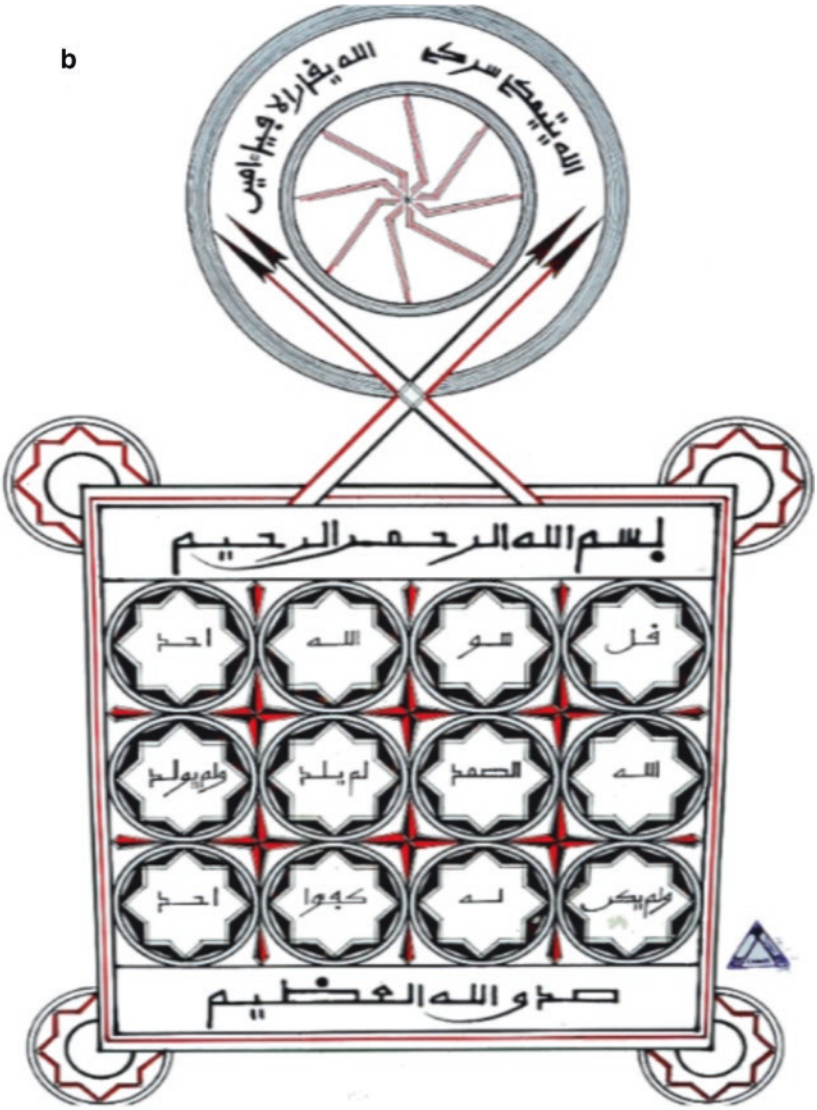

Fig. 17.8 (continued)

metal. The writing is often beautifully executed; at other times it is difficult or impossible to decipher the text. In many cases the writing is composed of meaningless scratches.

Hausa shamanic calligraphers use the verses from the Qurʾān, group of words, or an individual word and create a visual tapestry of calligraphic

Fig. 17.9 Gabari and Mosque Wall zayyana, Kano, 2016 (Credit: Abdalla Uba Adamu)

Fig. 17.10 Emiral Art and Warsh Calligraphy in Kano (Credit: Abdalla Uba Adamu)

Fig. 17.11 **a** and **b**: Talismanic Wall Murals, Kano, January 2018 (Credit: Abdalla Uba Adamu)

Fig. 17.11 (continued)

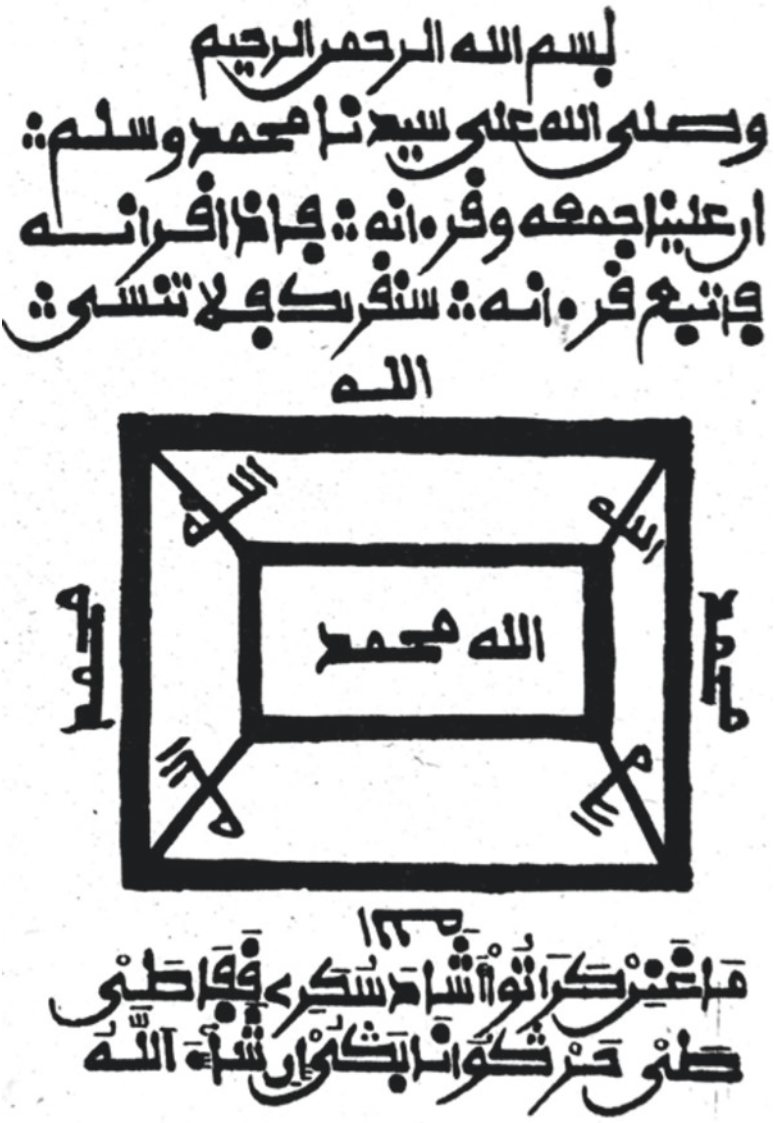

Fig. 17.12 *Hatimi* to Enhance Memorization of the Qur'ān (Credit: Abdalla Uba Adamu's personal collection of local market editions)

transformations based on these words to produce an amulet that provides cure to various ailments—from protection against armed robbery, winning the heart of a beautiful patron, to being fabulously rich. These geometric diagrams, referred to as *khātim* (Hausa: *hatimi* in singular and *hatimai* in plural) are crafted by marabouts with often limited understanding of Islam, or those

who do have comprehensive understanding of Islam but chose to exploit the awe and respect Muslims hold on any aspect of the Qurʾānic word and propose cures for many ailments. They are common across the Islamic world.

The acceptance of the *hatimai* users seems to be spread across the non-Arabic Islamic world. Such textual amulets are referred to as *taʿwīz* (amulet of perseverance) in Pakistan and Middle Asia. And whereas in Asia these amulets are engraved on various media and worn around the neck, in northern Nigeria they are written on paper and wrapped up in threads or animal skin and worn around the neck or around the body as a written charm (Hausa: *laya*). Often the marabout will instruct the "patient" (for they are all considered cures for perceived illness, incapacitation, or unfilled desires) to write out the entire text on either a wooden or metal slate—using ink made from gum Arabic and soot—wash the ink in a bowl of water and drink the water, often adding flavoring such as sugar. The writing style has remained consistently Warsh script, regardless of where the Shaman resides, as they use the same kind of script throughout northern Nigeria.

An analysis of a collection of fifty *hatimi* posters purchased in January 2018 in the Kano "Ajamawa" market (the section of the old city market where Islamic and ʿAjamī booksellers ply their trade) shows that almost all of them were targeted at solving one problem or the other. The most prolific of the calligraphers was Buhari Imām Aḥmadu Sadauki Dala Kano who had a stall in the old Kano Kurmi market that sells the *hatimai* he produces. He told me that the business had run in the family for generations. While clearly thriving a trade out of selling the *hatimai* bundles that occupied his market stall, he was frank enough to admit that he did not expect any of them to actually work in the way described—and that it was the individual's faith in life and their ability that would see them through, not the incantations or the amulets. Further, during the discussions, he revealed the utterly random nature of the geometric designs of his *hatimai*, basing some of them on earlier designs which get repeated over and over. There does not seem to be a focus on the aesthetics of the design, more on their being simple templates around which the Islamic word can be arranged. This is shown by the fact that in only few samples were actual words stylized by being stretched out; the rest of the design on each sample focuses on geometry and spatial arrangement of letters. Figure 17.12 shows an example of a simple square within a square design containing two words: *Allāh* and *Muḥammad* arranged in a specific spatial configuration.

The first line is a prayer and invocation of blessings of Allāh on Prophet Muḥammad. The second and third lines contain three different verses from Qurʾān. The first is *Inna ʿalaynā jamʿahu wa Qurʾāna* is from *Sūrat al-Qiyāma* (Q75:15), and translates as: "Indeed, upon Us is its collection [in your heart] and [to make possible] its recitation." This is followed by *Fa idhā Qarʾaʾnāhū fa attabiʿ Qurʾānahū* (Q75:18): "So when We have recited it [through Gabriel], then follow its recitation." The paragraph ends with

Fig. 17.13 Textual Amulet for Curing Erectile Dysfunction (Credit: Abdalla Uba Adamu's personal collection of local market editions)

Sanuqriʾuka falā tansāʾ, *Sūrat al-Aʿalā* (Q87:6): "We shall make you recite (the Qur'ān) so you (O Muḥammad) shall not forget (it)." The scripter's explanation of this *hatimi* at the bottom says it is a cure against memory lapses or forgetfulness. It is to be written out on a wooden slate 100 times, washed in water and mixed with sugar and drunk for seven days, and it will work *inshāʾ Allāh* (Arabic: God willing) as added in the explanation of the *hatimi*.

It is not clear, of course, how drinking this amulet can cure memory lapses or accelerate ability to read and memorize the Qurʾān. But the power of the two words alone—Allāh and Muḥammad—is often considered a cure for all ills, and shamans exploit the awe with which the name of God and the Prophet are held and prescribe a cure for human failings. Further, by carefully selecting verses from the Qurʾān that allude to memorization of the text, the credibility of the *hatimi* is guaranteed. This is more so as the highest target of any Islamic student in northern Nigeria is to acquire the ability to memorize the entire Qurʾān and become a *hāfiz* (Arabic: someone who guards the Qurʾān in the heart), an honorific from when the Qurʾān was memorized during its revelation, rather than written down.

Placing the name of Allāh on each of the four corners of the square is a device to attract divine blessing for one's activity from all angles. The juxtaposition of *Muḥammad* and *Allāh* in the center of the square thus confers on the design its divine credibility. A second sample of calligraphic use of the Qurʾānic word by Hausa shamans is in the cure for Erectile Dysfunction. Figure 17.13 shows the *hatimi* for this.

The first part of the narrative is the instruction and starts with invocation of blessings of Allāh on Prophet Muḥammad. The next sentence reads as follows: *fāʾidatu quwwat al-dhakar, taktibu wa tasharabu* (Arabic); *kafa tara sau tara* (Hausa) (significance of penile strength, write (on slate), and drink 9×9 times). What follows is the illustration of eighteen squares, with a writing in each cell. The first vertical nine squares are filled with a single verse from *Sūrat āl ʿImrān* (160), *In yanṣurkum Allāhu falā ghāliba lakum* (Arabic: If Allāh supports you (plural), then no one can defeat you." The next sentence is a group of words that are not literarily or grammatically connected and indicates the actual amulet which is an invocation of God's powers: *dhū quwwatin* (power), *dhū ḥurmatin* (sake), *dhū makānatin* (elevated position, rank, or dignity), *dhū izzin* (lofty) and *dhū faḍlin* (bounty). This is followed by numbers in the other squares that seemed to be included for effect, since the configuration gives a mystical symbolism that is not clear to the uninitiated. It also instructs the patient is to copy it 81 times (9×9 times) on a wooden slate, wash it and drink the water.

The unusual mixing of Arabic and Hausa in the instruction might be due to a lapse on the part of the scripter on his ability to convey "9×9 times" in Arabic or the desire to reach out to Hausa ʿAjamī users who do not know Arabic. The simple 3×3 magic square harks back to the earliest recording of such artistic devices by the eighth-century alchemist Jabīr b. Hayyān, who used the square in a *khātim* that is to assist in childbirth (Porter 2004). Moving away from the magic square is an overlapping graphic that superimposes the word *Allāh* and *Li Allāh* on *Muḥammad* to emphasize all-powerful curative function of the *hatimi*. This is further, and more graphically emphasized in the *hatim* referred to as *Khātimin Ismu-l-Lāhi-l-ʿAẓīm* shown in Fig. 17.14.

Within the *hatimi* there is an *āya* (verse) from *Sūrat al-Baqara* (Q2:117) which reads as follows: *Badīʿ al-samāwāti wa-l-ardi wa idhā qadā amran fa*

Fig. 17.14 The *Ismu-l-Lāhi-l-ʿAẓīm Hatim* (Credit: Abdalla Uba Adamu's personal collection of local market editions)

innamā yaqūlu lahū kun fayakūn (Originator of the heavens and the earth. When He decrees a matter, He only says to it, "Be," and it is). The Arabic instruction is followed by a Hausa ʿAjamī translation. It is claimed to be a cure for every tribulation—including preventing a woman's husband from marrying additional wife—and ailment except death.

Fig. 17.15 The secret of the *Bismillāh* (Credit: Abdalla Uba Adamu's personal collection of local market editions)

Although rare, occasional zoomorphic calligraphic designs often surface in Hausa shamanistic calligraphy. There are two types. The first is clearly based on existing zoomorphic works which wrap a particular Qurʾānic word around the animal. The second types are simple, and often crude drawing of insects (e.g., any bug) or animals (e.g., snake). These drawings are then accompanied by calligraphic placement of specific Qurʾānic words as an antidote against the

poisons of that particular creature. One of the more striking zoomorphic calligraphy is the Secret of Bismillāh, as shown in Fig. 17.15.

The zoomorphic design is referred to as the secret of Bismillāh, and was based on Prophet Muḥammad's ḥadith which insists that everything a Muslim does must start with Bismillāh. The entire *hatimi* is based on the opening salutations of the letter written by Solomon to Queen Sheba, as narrated in *Sūrat al-Naml* (Q27:30). Surrounding the Bismillāh figure is the greeting: *Innahū min Sulaymān wa innahū Bismillāhi al-raḥmāni al-Raḥīm* (Indeed, it is from Solomon, and indeed, it reads: In the name of Allāh, the Most Merciful, the Most Beneficent). The *hatimi* is used to ward off *jinn* (spirits) based on its association with Solomon, a prophet with powers over both men and jinn. The zoomorphic shaped was based on the Hoopoe bird (*Al-huda-huda*), which brought the news of Queen Bilqīs (Queen Sheba) to Prophet Solomon in the narrative.

Conclusion

In its unification of the Muslim world, Islam brings together different aesthetic values and interpretations of the art of the word in a singular fold. Muslim communities interpret the art of the word in a way defined by their history, culture, and cosmology. For as Al-Faruqi (2014) argues, early Muslims, taking up the aesthetic creativity of their Semitic, Byzantine, and Sassanian predecessors developed new materials, motifs, and techniques to reflect their art within Islamic mindset. African Muslim communities, unhampered by inherited transnational aesthetics reflect this diversity in their calligraphic interpretation of the Word of God.

For the Muslim Hausa, calligraphy has moved from neat beautiful handwriting to paying artistic homage to the same neat and beautiful handwriting—not because it is made by artists who are fastidious about their writing, but because the writing is the Word of God. Surrounding such writing with aesthetic visual beauty serves to reinforce the beauty of the Word. Hausa calligraphic aesthetics therefore radiate from inside the circle enclosing the Word to the outer margins, reinforcing and protecting the beauty of the Word. By domesticating the Warsh script and creating zayyana calligraphy around the script, Hausa calligraphers have reaffirmed their ownership and artistry of African Islamic calligraphy.

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